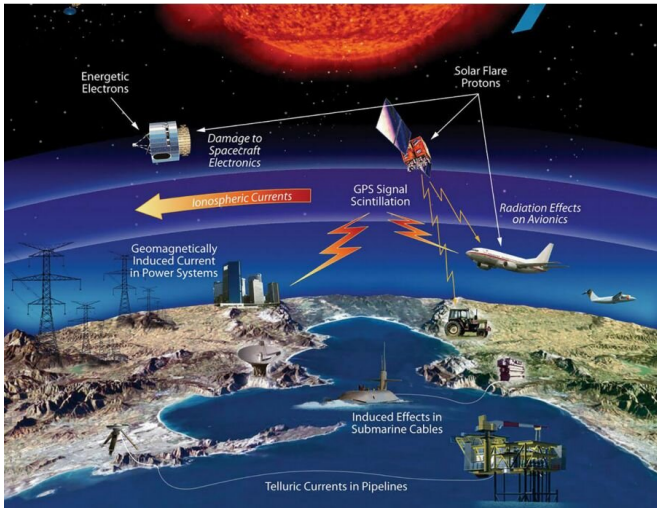


# Did the aurora borealis play a role in sinking the Titanic?

22 September 2020, by Bob Yirka



Credit: NASA

Independent weather researcher Mila Zinkova is raising the question of whether the aurora borealis played a role in the events that led to the sinking of the Titanic. In her paper published in the journal *Weather*, Zinkova suggests it is possible that the aurora borealis interfered with navigational systems, making it difficult for the crew of the Titanic to avoid crashing into an iceberg, which led to the ship sinking and the deaths of over 1,500 people.

The Titanic sank on the night of April 15, 1912 and its legend lives on. But questions still remain regarding the failure of the [crew](#) to spot the [iceberg](#) in its path while there was still time to turn and avoid a collision. In her paper, Zinkova suggests the [aurora](#) borealis may have played a major role that fateful night.

Zinkova notes that multiple eyewitnesses to the sinking reported that the northern lights were quite prominent as the ship sank. The aurora's [light](#) helped rescuers spot people in lifeboats and in the

water. There was no moon that night, and it would have been a much more difficult rescue without the flickering green, purple, blue and red aurora.

But then there might not have been a collision at all, Zinkova points out, if the light show had not been going on. She notes that the [northern lights](#) are caused by high-speed streams of electrified gas emitted by the sun. The aurora develops when the gas strikes the Earth's atmosphere. Those charged particles, she notes, can also interfere with both magnetic and electric signals. She believes that it is possible that they disrupted navigational equipment, preventing the crew from steering around an area known to have icebergs.

And the very same particles could also have played havoc with communications to and from the Titanic, preventing the crew from receiving warnings about icebergs and from sending distress signals after the collision occurred. Perhaps worst of all, Zinkova points out, those charged particles could have disrupted the ship's compass. A course deviation of just 0.5 degrees, she notes, could have meant the difference between life and death.

Zinkova also notes that the official report on the sinking of the Titanic blamed amateur radio operators for generating the interference that disrupted communications to and from Titanic. She further notes that officials at the time did not know about the kinds of communications disruptions that geomagnetic storms can produce. When considering the information available today, she suggests, it seems more likely the sinking was due to the [aurora borealis](#).

**More information:** Mila Zinkova. A possible role of space weather in the events surrounding the Titanic disaster, *Weather* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/wea.3817](#)

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APA citation: Did the aurora borealis play a role in sinking the Titanic? (2020, September 22) retrieved 1 December 2020 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-09-aurora-borealis-role-titanic.html>

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